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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000247

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TAGS: PGOV PREL FJ

SUBJECT: FIJI ELECTION PREPARATIONS WAY BEHIND SCHEDULE

REF: A. SUVA 147

1B. SUVA 86

Classified By: DCM Ted Mann, per 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: Evidence is mounting that Fiji's interim government is intentionally dragging its feet in preparing for the national elections it has promised to hold in early 2009. The Finance Ministry has not yet released funds needed to staff up the Elections Office or signed off on a New Zealand donation of software needed to draw electoral boundaries. The Ministry recently issued a circular requiring that all assistance must be channeled through central government accounts - apparently doing away with the special trust funds donors had planned to use to ensure their aid is only used for election-related purposes. The Constituency Boundaries Commission has done next to nothing. The Chairman of the Elections Commission recently endorsed the concept of "electronic voter registration," throwing into doubt announced plans to start door to door registration of voters later this month. The only positive news on the election front is (finally) the selection of a new Supervisor of Elections. Negotiations on the Supervisor's contract may be completed this week. End summary.

Ministry of Finance Holding Up the Election Process

12. (C) Progress in preparing for Fiji's planned March 2009 election remains painfully slow. The Ministry of Finance has proved to be a major hurdle. Fiji's Deputy Supervisor of elections, Soro Toutou, told the multilateral Election Donors Coordination Committee (EDCC) June 11 that Elections Office work remains hamstrung because the Finance Ministry has not yet released funds allocated in the 2008 budget to hire 38 staff (up from three at present). A Finance Ministry official at the meeting insisted the funds - promised several months ago - would be released "any day now." (As of June 18 the funds had not been released.) The Finance Ministry official also acknowledged that funding promised to the Constituency Boundaries Commission (CBC) has not yet materialized. Finally, the head of the NZAID office in Suva told the EDCC that NZAID is ready to provide the CBC with new software and technical assistance to help draw boundaries, but Finance has not yet approved the required exemption from normal procurement procedures to allow the donation to go through.

13. (C) The Chairman of the EDCC, Fiji Ministry of Justice Permanent Secretary Pio Tikoduadua, took the Finance Ministry representative to task for delays in getting funds released. He also noted donor concern about a circular recently issued by the Ministry of Finance stipulating that foreign aid must be channeled through the central government's accounts. The circular specifically forbids the use of special purpose trust funds. Noting that the governments of Australia and New Zealand plan to use trust

fund mechanisms to assist with the elections, Tikoduadua urged Finance to exempt election-related assistance from its new policy. Foreign governments, he said, are understandably concerned that funds they earmark for elections be readily accessible to the Elections Office and only used for election-related purposes.

Boundaries Commission Drags Its Feet

¶4. (C) Donor country representatives told us after the meeting they are increasingly frustrated with IG inaction on elections. The CBC has talked a good game but has done next to nothing to get new boundaries drawn. The six month statutory time frame required to draw boundaries and allow for public comment was supposed to have started months ago. To date, no plans to start the six month clock ticking have been announced. Finance's failure to clear off on the donation of new software from NZAID (para two above) is only part of the problem. Donors believe the CBC is not really interested in drawing boundaries based on the current electoral system and will drag its feet as long as possible.

Voter Registration Plans in Disarray

¶5. (C) Recent statements from the Chairman of the Electoral Commission (EC), Sahu Khan, are also of concern. Khan told the press May 29 that the EC is considering adopting an electronic voter registration system similar to that used in Samoa. At the EDCC meeting, Tikoduadua and Toutou acknowledged that electronic registration is under consideration but said no final decision has been made. The

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planned June kick-off for house-to-house registration may be delayed. Toutou said that if the new system is adopted, fingerprints and other data from each eligible voter may have to be gathered, requiring a far more extensive registration program than was originally planned. (Note: Per ref A, the EC had previously decided to use the 2006 electoral rolls as the basis for voter registration. The objective of the house-to-house registration effort slated to begin in June was to update and correct those rolls. If the EC decides in favor of electronic registration, the 2006 rolls will be discarded and the registration process will start from scratch, requiring significant additional resources.) Contacts at the Australian High Commission and NZAID told us that a change to electronic registration would be time consuming and very costly. Both doubted the process could be finished in time to hold elections in March.

New Supervisor of Elections to Begin Work in July

¶6. (U) Felicity Heffernan, the New Zealand lawyer recently appointed as Supervisor of Elections, arrived in Fiji June 18 to finalize her three-year contract. Heffernan is scheduled to start work in early July. Australia is paying most of her salary but did not play a role in the selection process. Rumors are floating that Ms. Heffernan, who seems to have no history related to elections, may be negotiating for an augmented pay package.

Comment

¶7. (C) The interim government appears to be intentionally making the election preparation process as difficult and slow as possible. The Finance Ministry's footdragging reflects the attitude of Interim Finance Minister Chaudhry, who reportedly told the visiting EU Troika delegation June 18 that elections won't be possible until April 2010. Bainimarama and other IG officials are just as unenthusiastic about the March 2009 date. The international community needs to keep the pressure on; but the IG may well fall further behind, making an election delay a fait accompli. It is a good bet that the IG will then blame any such delay on the international community's visa sanctions and other impediments.

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